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The rabbi stood before the holy ark on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, and before the eyes of his entire congregation, he fell on his face, crying "Lord of the universe! I am nothing!" The congregation was seized with wonder at the humble devotion of their rabbi. In the next moment, the Cantor also came before the ark, and fell on his face, crying out "Master of the Universe! I am nothing!!" Again, a murmur of appreciation passed through the congregation. Seeing all of this, and swept up in the excitement of the moment, Barney the caretaker rushed forward, came before the ark, and fell on his face crying out "Lord of the Universe! I too am nothing!" At which the rabbi winked at the cantor and said "Look who thinks he's nothing!"

Tomorrow afternoon, here at CBB, some of us...anyone who wants to...will follow the ancient practice just described in that story, of lying flat out on the ground. Around 4:00PM, when there aren't too many people here, we re-enact the scene in ancient Jerusalem when once a year the High Priest would speak out loud the Name of God and the people would all fall on their faces and cry out *Baruch shem kvod malchuto l'olam vaed!*" It is the most shocking moment of the whole day. And also the riskiest....for exactly the reason highlighted by the joke. If falling down on our faces ends up being a way to show off, then it has completely backfired. Whatever Yom Kippur is about, it is not meant to be a day to show off.

What is Yom Kippur for? What deep human wisdom are we taught by this long night and day? I would like to share with you this evening the story of my own search for the meaning of the Day of Atonement.

For many years, throughout high school, college, and even when I was a rabbinic student, I never understood Yom Kippur. The core Yom Kippur prayers, going on and on about the sins we had committed, made no sense to me. For the sin which we have committed, for the sin which we have committed, for the sin which we have committed.... As I mumbled the words as a teenager, I thought to myself: what sins?? I had been good! In fact, boringly good! OK, I talked back to my mother. But I knew that was normal! I just did not think of myself committing sins.

In college and rabbinic school, I did begin to accumulate some sins. Never mind the details. But I still could not get my mind around the idea of being forgiven by God. What would that be like? God is completely hidden--invisible and silent. **How** would God forgive? How would a person **know** if he or she were forgiven? I had questions.

The one piece of Yom Kippur that did make sense, even when I was young, was the fast. For one day of the year to know what it feels like to be hungry. Admittedly, throughout high school and college, I took a pretty relaxed approach to the fast. I said to myself: I will fast **until I am really hungry**. No one explained to me that **that's when the fast begins**. But I understood in theory the religious power of going hungry for a day.

It was many years before I began to take fasting seriously. After I became a rabbi, I discovered that the fast returns us to the oldest and deepest layer of this holiest day of our year. I opened the Torah and saw the commandment: *On the tenth day of this seventh month there shall be a day of atonement; it shall be a holy gathering to you; and you shall afflict yourselves.* (Leviticus 23:27) I opened the Mishnah and saw how our sages

defined “afflict:” no eating or drinking, no bathing, no anointing, no wearing shoes and no sex. (M. Yoma 8:1) I saw that over the centuries, all of us...even the orthodox... have retreated from the original austerity of Yom Kippur, wearing canvas tennis shoes instead of going barefoot. In its original form, the Day of Atonement was our annual experience of being hungry, thirsty, dirty, smelly, barefoot and lonely. One day each year at the very lowest rung of physical human existence. They did not teach us this in rabbinic school.

I began to understand Yom Kippur while I was the Hillel rabbi at UCSB. My congregants were college students and I knew that the Judaism I was offering had to be authentically grounded both in the tradition and in real lived experience. So I experimented with taking on all five afflictions. I led services in the evening and then all day long on Yom Kippur without showering, spent the night on my couch at Hillel, far from my wife, and even came to lead services barefoot. It was out in Isla Vista, so I fit right in.

I thought deeply about the meaning of going barefoot, and I saw that it is about *being vulnerable*. In taking off our shoes we remove one of our most basic physical lines of defense....exposing the delicate soles of our feet to the sharp stones, the burning sand and the piercing thorns. This is what God asks of Moses at the Burning Bush: “*shal naalecha me'al raglecha* Remove your shoes from your feet...” Removing our shoes we make ourselves vulnerable. Fasting, we make ourselves vulnerable. Not showering or wearing perfume, we are exposed in all our human frailty and imperfection. The afflictions of Yom Kippur are a path of physical and psychological vulnerability.

As a rabbi in Isla Vista, I experimented with the custom of falling *kor'im* on Yom Kippur afternoon. That was hard. I felt intensely self-conscious, and was terrified of looking ridiculous. But I explained what we were doing, and a number of us did it together. We lay down on the floor and it felt powerful. As I lay there exposed, hungry, thirsty, tired and smelly, I had stopped caring about what people think, and how it looks. All my walls had come down. I lay there broken, together with my broken friends.

That is the meaning of Yom Kippur. Once a year, on this day, we let down our defenses. To do this, we probably do not need to go barefoot...although you can. And we probably do not need to lie down on the floor of the sanctuary....although I encourage you to think about trying it. It is even possible to experience the vulnerability of Yom Kippur without fasting, although in my experience fasting helps. But this is the point. The physical afflictions of Yom Kippur are all devices, they are tools for breaking down our defenses.

Now I see that this is the point of the Vidui, the Confession which we recite repeatedly tonight and tomorrow: Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha.. For the sin which we have committed against You. Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha. Al chet shechatanu l'fanecha. Those words are a jack hammer, hammering at the walls and foundations of our ego. Hammering away at all our defenses. They do not come down easily. We do not achieve vulnerability in one brief prayer. Arising out of our hunger and out of our physical vulnerability, the words slowly begin to make sense: *Atah yodeia razei olam*. God, You know the mysteries of the world, all the hidden truths. Memories and regrets deep within us, repressed and put away in the dark corners of our bellies, our kidneys, our heart. None of them are hidden from You. Your eyes see them all. Help us to look and

to see them all, with honesty, courage and hope. *Forgive us. Pardon us. Let us begin again.*

Recently, I even feel I have begun to understand something about being forgiven.

Somewhere along the way, many of us pick up the idea that we are supposed to be perfect. Especially those of us who were good boys and girls when we were little, and were richly rewarded for that. The desire and need to be perfect, however, ends up being a terrible burden for us, and a source of pain for the people all round us. We need our spouse to be perfect, and lash out at them if they are not. And we need our children to be perfect, and we suffer and make them suffer when they are not. Meanwhile, our ego builds a castle for itself in which we defend ourselves against all criticism. We cannot allow it in.

So much suffering comes from our desperate need to be perfect.

The deep wisdom of Yom Kippur is that we can let those walls come down. We can allow criticism, from those who love us, and from those who do not. We can stop pretending to be perfect. In that moment is born the possibility of real apology and real forgiveness. After all these years of searching, now I believe that this is what it feels like to be forgiven....*to know without anxiety* that even with our psychological defenses down, we are still safe. To be humble and to be secure.

“You have been told,” taught the prophet Micah, “what is good; and what the Lord requires of you: only to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God.” I hope to keep finding new levels of Yom Kippur for many years to come....I expect it will remain mysterious to me until the day I die. But at this point on my journey, Micah’s words sum up the deep wisdom of this ancient holy night: *hatzneia lechet im elohecha*. “To walk humbly with your God” *Ken yehi ratzon*. May it be Your will.

L’shanah tova.